



**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development**

**LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GRAMMAR LEARNING  
THROUGH ORAL COMMUN ICATIVE ACTIVITIES: A STUDY  
AMONG THE ENGLISH PREPARATORY 1 STUDENTS IN  
UNIMAS**

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BEd Hons (ESL) 2009

**Pengesahan Hasil Kerja Asal Pelajar (Bahasa Melayu)**

**Pengesahan Pelajar**

Saya mengakui bahawa Projek Tahun Akhir bertajuk  
“Learners’ perceptions of grammar learning through oral communicative activities:  
A study among the English Preparatory 1 students in UNIMAS”  
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8<sup>th</sup> May, 2009

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**Pengesahan Hasil Kerja Asal Pelajar (Bahasa Inggeris)**

**Statement of Originality**

The work described in this Final Year Project, entitled  
“Learners’ perceptions of grammar learning through oral communicative activities:  
A study among the English Preparatory 1 students in UNIMAS”  
is to the best of the author’s knowledge that of the author except  
where due reference is made.

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Projek bertajuk “Learners’ perceptions of grammar learning through oral communicative activities: A study among the English Preparatory 1 students in UNIMAS” telah disediakan oleh Grace Wong Sau Fah dan telah diserahkan kepada Fakulti Sains Kognitif dan Pembangunan Manusia sebagai memenuhi syarat untuk Ijazah Sarjana Muda Sains dengan Kepujian (Sarjana Muda Pendidikan dengan kepujian ESL).

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The project entitled 'Learners' perceptions of grammar learning through oral communicative activities: A study among the English Preparatory 1 students in UNIMAS' was prepared by Grace Wong Sau Fah and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Science with Honours (BEd Hons ESL)

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(Hebrew 13:5)

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I pray in turn that you’d be blessed  
By the loving hand of God  
I pray your day be filled with peace  
And with God’s awesome grace  
And may you know His presence more  
As you behold His face.”

-by M.S. Lowndes



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### **List of abbreviations**

OCA	: Oral communicative activities
CLT	: Communicative language learning
PPP	: Presentation – practice- production
TTT	: Task-teach-task
KBSM	: Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah
MUET	: Malaysian University Entrance Test
UNIMAS	: University Malaysia Sarawak
CLS	: Centre of Language Studies
ICT	: Information communication technology
CLL	: Communicative Language Learning
ZPD	: Zone of Proximal Development
ESL	: English as second language
L1	: First language

## **Abstract**

Learners' perceptions play an important role in language learning. The sets of attitude, belief and psychology traits constituted learners' point of views often determine the quality of students' learning. This study aimed to address learners' perceptions of grammar learning through OCA. The quantitative survey instrumented a questionnaire was done among 203 respondents who were students of English Preparatory 1 learners of UNIMAS. In particular, the study investigated into learners' perceptions on the helpfulness of the approach, aspects in OCA that helped in grammar learning and activities that preferred by learners. The findings revealed that learners perceived the approach as helpful to a certain extent. It was found activities of authentic interactions were more welcomed than others. Besides, learners valued activities whereby teacher's actively involved during language class. However, learners were not very confident in the area of language use. Learner perception is a useful aspect educational stakeholders may look into to ensure higher success rate in language learning

## ***Abstrak***

*Pandangan pelajar memainkan peranan yang penting dalam pembelajaran bahasa. Perangai, kepercayaan dan psikologi yang membentuk pandangan pelajar didapati mampu menentukan kualiti pembelajaran seseorang pelajar itu. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menjangkau pandangan pelajar dalam pembelajaran tatabahasa melalui aktiviti komunikasi lisan. Seramai 203 orang responden yang terlibat merupakan pelajar kursus English Preparatory 1 di UNIMAS. Secara lebih teliti, kajian ini menyiasat pandangan pelajar dari segi kemampuan cara ini untuk menolong, aspek aktiviti komunikasi lisan yang dapat menolong dalam pembelajaran tatabahasa dan aktiviti-aktiviti yang diminati pelajar. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa para pelajar berpendapat cara ini dapat menolong pembelajaran mereka. Aktiviti bersifat berinteraksi autentik amat diterima. Selain itu, penglibatan guru semasa pembelajaran juga amat dihargai pelajar. Namun begitu, para pelajar kurang yakin dalam aplikasi penggunaan bahasa. Pandangan pelajar merupakan aspek yang memanfaatkan yang mampu membawa kejayaan pembelajaran yang lebih terjamin.*

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Learners' perceptions of grammar learning through oral communicative activities: A study among the Preparatory 1 students in UNIMAS**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

This chapter looked into the aspects involved this study of learners' perceptions of grammar learning through oral communicative activities (OCA) among the Preparatory 1 students of UNIMAS. It consisted of the background of the study, the problem statements, research questions, objectives of the study, its significance, the scope of the study and the operational key terms.

In particular, this study intended to find out from learners how they viewed this approach of grammar learning. In addition, it also investigated what were the most preferred oral communicative activities in the context of learning grammar through OCA.

#### **1.1 Background of the study**

In the 1970s, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), an approach to language teaching took the language world by a whirl-wind. Linguists and language teachers alike began to experience a paradigm shift brought by the change in the role of grammar in language teaching. The attention was now on the use of language as a means of communication instead of learning the language structures. Consequently, it paved the way on how to learn language in order to communicate effectively.

According to Ratnawati (1996), the CLT affected the role of grammar to the extent that grammar learning became secondary and communication took the main role in language classroom instead. This change eventually also affected the language syllabuses in schools and other learning institutions, and subsequently the scenario of language learning.

Nevertheless, language researchers in the recent years has crystallised the role of grammar in the English as second language (ESL) classrooms. Renowned researchers like Rod Ellis (1988), David Nunan (1988) William Rutherford and Michael S. Smith (1988) and Weaver (2001) unanimously agree that grammar should resume its prime role in the language classroom. Nevertheless, CLT remain an influential factor in language learning up to the present. Most practices in the language classrooms adopt both views; that is while the focus is on communication, grammar is also explicitly taught.

Grammar is important in the learning of language as stated by Penny Ur (cited in Thornbury, 1999, p14), *“There is no doubt that knowledge –implicit or explicit- of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language.”* However, grammar instruction has come under much scrutiny over the decades due to its controversial and divided opinions on the methods of teaching it. The problematic nature of grammar learning at one point instigated opinion whether it should or should not be taught formally in the language classroom.

On the other hand, learners are being studied when looking for effective methods in language teaching. Particularly Nunan (1999); he argues that learning is about the learners, not the subject being learned. Emerging along are the studies on learner needs, learner expectations and the perceptions of learners on how grammar is learned.

In the context of Malaysian English teaching and learning, *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah* (KBSM) which is implemented two decades ago adopted a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. This approach subscribes to

communication as the main goal of language acquisition and aims at producing competent English language users who are accurate in forms and function. Intended grammar items to be taught are listed in the language content section and are meant to be covered in the specific school terms.

However, according to a research done by Ratnawati (1996) on teacher perceptions on the Malaysian English syllabus, she found that 96% of the 419 teachers who participated in her study were of the view that it was important for the students to learn grammar explicitly, and 90% of the teachers would want a syllabus that allowed grammar to be taught directly and extendedly (explicitly). She further argues that the Malaysian English syllabus for year 2000 and beyond lacks of explicitness when it comes to grammar teaching concerns.

In UNIMAS, through its English Preparatory 1 classes, grammar is taught in context; designed to engage learners through oral communication activities across units. This course gears to equip learners with oral communicative skills and competency. Its theme on learning English for social purposes makes it clear that the aim of the course is communicative, or more accurately “*to increase the English oral social language skills of students*” (Ting, S.H., Siti Marina, K., Ho, A.P., Ahmad S.B Bin Mohamad Tuah and Campbell, Y.M. 2007. P iii). A section on language focus serves as a platform for direct language learning. Grammar is explicitly taught after the listening and speaking through three dialogues or modeled speeches. Modeled speech, according to Ellis (1988) has a focus on form.

The focus of this study is on the perceptions of learners on learning grammar through listening and speaking activities. It does not concern with the teaching and learning styles although they are important aspects in language learning.

## **1.2 Problem statements and research questions**

Nunan (1999) argues that language courses should be designed to fit students’ needs in language, not students fitting into the courses. Teachers ought to be

sensitive to provide a balance in order to cater for students' needs. Yet, on the other side of the coin, teachers have their own sets of beliefs on how language ought to be taught. Unfortunately, failure to tackle these expectations may result in frustration and alienation on the part of the learners.

Thornbury (1999) echoes that learners' expectations are not to be ignored. Learners come from different language learning backgrounds and they bring along a set of expectations to the language classroom. These previous experiences with language learning can be a factor that shapes their demands on language learning to be more efficient and systematic. He quotes two examples of these expectations which reflect the perceptions of learners on language learning: (i) learners expect "*more grammar*" in the language classroom and (ii) learners come to language classroom "*just want to talk*" (Thornbury, 1999, p.20).

It was in this light the study hopes to find out:

1. whether learners think the oral communication activities help them in their grammar learning?
2. to what extent learners think these activities contribute to their grammar learning;
3. what are some of the ways that help grammar learning?
4. whether the frequency of activity carried out influence learners' perception in learning;
5. which are the most and the least preferred oral communication activities in grammar learning?

### **1.3 Objectives of the study**

Hawkey's (2006) study on teacher and learner perception on language activities in the language classroom found that the two stakeholders of language teaching and learning presented a stark contrast in the area of grammar learning. Interestingly, Weaver, McNally and Moerman (2001) too presented similar findings in their study on grammar learning in the language classroom. Not much is known why it

is so but many researchers argued that it is the previous knowledge or training which shaped a person's beliefs system that could have contributed to the phenomenon (i.e. Tarone and Yule, 1989; Weaver et al, 2001; Hawkey, 2006).

Although grammar is essential in language learning, some find it '*rather trivial*' (Ellis, 1997, p.66) because learners just need to resettle their first language (L1) parameter (if there are minor differences between L1 of the learner and the target language). Grammar is also 'difficult' in a sense that any violation of its rules is unacceptable. Nevertheless it does not mean that grammatical competency is not attainable. In fact, Thornbury (1999, p17) says that "*Grammar is a system of learnable rules*".

Grammar can be learned through many ways. Learning grammar through an integrated manner is a contemporary way of learning language since Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) comes to the language learning scene. Learning grammar through oral communication is one of these approaches. It is carried out through a subset of lesson grafted into a main lesson. For instance, in a listening and or speaking lesson, a sub-lesson on related grammar item is selected to be taught.

In the course English Preparatory 1 in UNIMAS, grammar is learned covertly (grammar is dealt with while doing language activities). Contextualisation is employed during the process. Some of the grammatical components found in the course are the adjectives, possessive pronouns, verbs, prepositions, etc. Meanwhile, the main goal of the course is to produce students who are competent in social communication skills. Therefore, although grammar is treated as secondary, it is an important component in the classroom activities. It is found in the language focus section of every unit where a specific grammar item is designed to be taught explicitly.

It is the researcher's desire to find out from the learners' view point the learning of grammar through oral communication activities. In particular, the objectives of the study are to find out:

- 1) whether learners think the oral communication activities help in their grammar learning
- 2) to what extent learners think the oral communicative activities contribute to their grammar learning
- 3) what are some of the ways that help grammar learning?
- 4) which are the most and the least preferred oral communication activities in grammar learning?

#### **1.4 Significance of study**

The area of grammar has always been a problematic area when come to second language learning; to the ones who teach as well as to the ones who learn. This is mentioned by Nunan (1999); linguists and native speakers alike seem to have disagreement as to the acceptability on certain sentences in the area of grammatical accuracy. However, the role of grammar teaching in the language classroom is never controversial. As Ratnawati (1996) puts it; though problematic, grammar is the centre of language teaching for a long time.

Over the years, the learning of grammar takes on many forms and methods. From learning grammar through classic language (i.e. literatures) to structuralist grammar learning (learning the rules of grammar through drills and practices), and Grammar Translation Methods (classes are taught in students' mother tongue, grammar rules and lists of words of the target language are memorised and translated) to Communicative Language Learning (language is seen as a system for the expression of meaning) in the 1970s; there are constant researches going on to look for an innovative way to best teach grammar.

Grammar learning in the Preparatory 1 course in UNIMAS is integrated into oral communicative activities. In the first three dialogues, a language feature particular

to a speaking genre is indirectly introduced. For example, in the unit '*Describing people*', adjectives of comparison are taught. It is not directly or explicitly taught until the learning is at the language focus section which comes after the listening and speaking activities involving literal and inferential comprehensions of the texts heard.

The common class proceeding patterns carried out is that students listen to three taped conversations, follow by literal and inferential questions. During the inferential questioning, students' attention is intentionally led to the grammar item intended to be learned. Questions such as "*Describe the girl that the boy is looking for.*" in conversation 1 and "*What does Salmah look like?*" in conversation 2 (Ting et al., 2007, p14) would direct learners to the use of descriptive language such as the adjectives of comparison.

In line with that, researches found that second language teachers and learners are of the same opinion with education researchers; they consider grammar essential in learning the target language (Rutherford, 1978; Celce-Murcia, 1991). Learners particularly possess perceptions on how to learn a language. Problems begin to emerge when students' perceptions conflicting with their instructors'. In Hawkey's (2006) study on the perceptions of teacher and learner in grammar exercises, he found that students ascribed higher prominence for grammar learning than their teachers.

It was in this light this study on learners' perceptions on grammar learning was first conceived. Then, it developed into a study that had a focus on the OCA. Hopefully it would help us to have a better view on how learners perceive this language learning experience of learning grammar through oral communicative activities. Besides, the study may also serve as a useful feedback to the stakeholders of the course; to suggest areas suitable for possible attention in language teaching and learning. In addition, it can be a learning process reflective to second language learners.